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Qaddafi's Authority Said to Be Weakening

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TRIPOLI, Libya—Col. Muammar Qaddafi is still publicly hailed as "The Leader" of this North African revolutionary state, but there are signs that his regime faces potentially serious trouble.

Often under the influence of sleeping pills, constantly fearful for his life, at times a near hermit and unpredictable to his subordinates and allies, Qaddafi appears to have lost the once fervent support of some of his countrymen, according to several Libyan officials who have personal contact with Qaddafi.

During my week-long visit here, many of the western-educated officials and bureaucrats who try to run the country on a daily basis said in private that they have become increasingly frustrated by the internal and foreign chaos their leader has stirred. Some refer to him jeeringly as "God."

"The country is in turmoil," one official said. "We expect something."

Another official, in a rage, called Qaddafi "small, out of it . . . a pinhead."

By no account is Qaddafi, who has ruled Libya for nearly 15 years, losing all of his political instincts. There are times when he appears in public, gives speeches and shows his lucidity and flair. But these periods are interspersed with longer times of withdrawal and public utterings that two Libyan authorities here separately described with the same word: "gibberish."

Qaddafi has always left aides and visitors waiting for hours or days for meetings with

him, but some Libyan officials said it has become much worse in recent months. He has trouble sleeping, they said, and wanders around day and night making morbid remarks. They said he is not in good health and either is incapable of making some key decisions or unable to communicate his thoughts. There is an irregularity in his daily schedule that is transmitted through the entire government and country.

Highly classified CIA reports circulating

in the U.S. government confirm this evaluation, including evidence that Qaddafi takes an excessive amount of sleeping pills,

according to American sources. One U.S. official said that Qaddafi is "burning the candle at both ends . . . high anxiety, high energy."

During this month's crisis at the Libyan embassy in London, which led to the British decision to break diplomatic relations with Libya, it was apparent here that government authority was almost hopelessly spread among Qaddafi, the Foreign Ministry and the so-called people's committees

that theoretically rule the country. The result was bungled negotiations that many here had hoped to resolve without a break in diplomatic relations.

If a dictatorship controls either by co-opting or crushing, Qaddafi has been crushing more than co-opting, stepping up a campaign of internal terror and repression. This may be in response to an attack on one of his most trusted aides, a shadowy but key figure in the Libyan government named Said Qadaf Dam. According to U.S. intelligence, Dam, a military officer and Qaddafi relative, is the second most powerful man in Libya and has been in charge of a series of attacks against the Libyan opposition abroad, including dissidents and unfriendly foreign governments.

In March, it was learned here, a car bomb injured Dam, and officials said he may lose his legs as a result. Foreign Minister Ali Treiki said Dam had been hurt in an automobile accident, but brushed off questions about the incident. Another well-placed official in Libya confirmed that it was an attack and said the bombing had substantially increased Qaddafi's fear that the CIA or Libyan dissidents were going to kill him.

Libyan officials also confirmed that a government ammunition dump had recently been blown up by a dissident group based in Rome, reportedly called The Volcano.

One Libyan dissident, Omar Abdullah Muhayshi, a one-time Qaddafi intimate who left the country in 1975 after a dispute with the ruler,

recently returned and, according to one reliable account, was kidnaped by Qaddafi's agents. In 1983, former CIA agent Edwin P. Wilson, who had been imprisoned for selling explosives to Libya, was acquitted by a U.S. District Court jury in Washington of charges of plotting the assassination of Muhayshi.

All this attention on real or imagined enemies has disillusioned many officials here, as have Qaddafi's various military adventures in Africa—as in Chad, where he has about 5,000 troops—and his attempts to overthrow enemies in Egypt and Sudan. His designs to forge a greater Arab revolutionary state, unifying Libya with Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Egypt or Sudan, have, in the words of one Libyan official, "cost billions and got us nowhere."

The internal repression has left a deep mark. The public hangings of two students for treason at Tripoli University on April 16 contributed to the anti-Qaddafi demonstration at the Libyan Embassy in London the next day. It was at that demonstration that a British policewoman was killed by shots fired from the building and 11 other persons were wounded. Five days later Britain broke diplomatic relations.

During that week, several Libyan officials urged me to write about the hangings. It was obvious from the tone of their remarks, and the fear expressed in their eyes, that the public executions greatly troubled them. The public hangings are a frequent subject of whispered conversations on the streets and in government offices.

One report circulating among Libyans was that a total of 23 persons had been publicly executed for treason in April alone. An official said that number was an exaggeration; he placed the total at 10. But he added: "It is impossible to know because there is no certain information, only rumors and maybe one hanging becomes 10 as [the report] circulates and is repeated."

This official said there were thousands of political prisoners in Libya, people who had spoken out against